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Mary McCay

Melanie McKay

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COMMON READING AND THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

*Students meet both Helen Prejean and the
prosecutor who sends men to death row.
Then Katrina comes through...*

By Mary McCay and Melanie McKay

Like many Jesuit universities, Loyola New Orleans confronts the challenge of integrating Ignatian values into students' academic course work. One way we pursue this goal is through our common curriculum, in which philosophy, rhetoric, literature, history, and religious studies courses explore disciplinary subject matter from the perspective of core values.

Students take these courses throughout their four years, but it is the foundational, first-year courses that introduce students to the values-oriented education that underlies our Jesuit mission. The first-year experience is for this reason especially important in Jesuit education, and we continuously worked to strengthen it.

A key to this effort in recent years has been a first-year common reading program that grounds incoming students' approach to academics in Ignatian values from the time they arrive on campus. The program turns on the sustained scrutiny of a common text chosen for its embrace of a social justice philosophy; readings and discussions of this text are incorporated into first-year courses across the disciplines so that students explore academic subjects within a context of ethics, social choices, and spiritual values. As it has grown, the common reading program has broadened the course of stud-

ies for incoming students and sparked an interdisciplinary learning experiment geared to the core curriculum.

Beginnings: Discussion Groups at Orientation

The common reading program began in 2002 as a component of the College of Arts and Sciences' first-year experience project. Over the summer, all incoming students were sent "The Vulgar Soul," a short story by Professor John Biguenet of Loyola's English department, from his collection *The Torturer's Apprentice*. The story follows a lapsed Catholic who inexplicably receives the stigmata and in his medical quest finds a spiritual awakening. During each of three summer orientation sessions, faculty from different disciplines led discussions of the story. The author met with students and discussed his work, telling them how the story germinated.

These discussions encouraged students to think about vital issues in the college experience: the value of open discussion, the necessity of listening to opposing views, and the importance of critical thinking. Based on the success of this modest common reading experiment, we decided to expand the program by moving to a longer text that faculty could take beyond orientation and adopt in their first-year courses.

A Program Evolving

To select a text suitable for inclusion in many disciplines, the College convened a committee of seventeen faculty members who worked throughout the year nominating books, reviewing them, and narrowing choices. This wide faculty representation was crucial for the program's expansion as it raised faculty awareness of the importance of coherent first-year programs. It also resulted in enthusiasm for curricular integration of the text.

The committee chose Sister Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking*, a harrowing account of a death penalty case with relevance to the foundational courses of our common curriculum as well as first-year sociology, political science, psychology and the natural sciences courses. The chance for students to meet and talk with the author had been a key strength of our earlier common reading experiment, and we decided to make this a permanent

Mary McCay is the Moon and Verna Landrieu distinguished teaching professor and chair of the English department.

Melanie McKay is associate professor of English and director of writing across the curriculum at Loyola New Orleans.

component. Accordingly, the College sent a copy of Sister Helen's book to each incoming student in early summer and invited Sister Helen to campus for a public lecture and meetings with students in the fall.

Special Events and Activities

In September, Sister Helen spoke to a capacity crowd, including upper-level students and off-campus visitors, about issues surrounding the death penalty and her journey as an activist, grounded in New Testament values. Joining Sister Helen that night was Ray Krone, the 100th death row inmate to be exonerated since the Supreme Court restored capital punishment.

Other events that semester involved first-year students in examining the morality of capital punishment: a production of *The Exonerated*, a play composed of monologues by death row exonerates, and a trip to the state penal farm at Angola, Louisiana, which for many students was the most eye-opening experience of their lives. Discussions surrounding these activities showed deep divisions among students on the issue. While a number of students had already decided that the death penalty was wrong, many others held to the contrary view, as reflected in society as a whole.

Common Reading in the Classroom

These differing opinions provided an excellent springboard to critical thinking in courses that incorporated *Dead Man Walking*. English department faculty found the book particularly useful in the first semester freshman course "Critical Thinking and Writing," in which students are challenged to think analytically about the works they read and the ideas to which they are exposed, to see themselves as thinking beings, using ideas to shape their lives and plans. Fifteen English teachers used parts of *Dead Man Walking*.

In one of these courses, the instructor assigned the book along with other texts that examined different sides of the capital punishment question as well



Jessica Martin helps out in the Beatrice Rafferty School on the Passamaquoddy Reservation in Maine. Fairfield University students were on spring break and took this Mission trip to northern Maine.

as the question of punishment in general. Readings included articles and stories on prisons and prison reform to complement the campus activities.

As the course unfolded, however, it became clear that the material was slanted in favor of Sister Helen's position, opposing capital punishment. To prevent a one-sided treatment of the issue, the professor invited an Assistant District Attorney from New Orleans to lay out the state's position in the prosecution of death penalty cases and to discuss his stance in a moral context. This exchange was important for students at Loyola, which has a well-known clinic in the Law School that works against the death penalty by researching and assisting in appeals cases for death row inmates. Exposing students to a working prosecutor helped them appreciate how men and women in the working world must grapple with the moral dynamics of a given public policy. The students began to understand how such issues are often more complex than their teachers or politicians let on.

Fostering Intentional Learning

While the activities and assignments associated with *Dead Man Walking* generated spirited discussions and thoughtful writing among our first-year students, the death penalty focus remained for the most part remote from their daily lives and therefore, finally, abstract. The choice for 2004, Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, more effectively bridged the gap between explorations of social justice and students' lives. The educational failures Kozol scoldingly describes—public schools in at-risk communities, mired in poverty, crime, and violence—outraged our students, whose education had been privileged. And studying the book in New Orleans, where public education had sunk to travesty, brought questions of social justice to their own front doors.

Service Learning

Kozol's public lecture in September galvanized interest in the book and the issues presented. In reviewing the

history of public education and latter-day failures, Kozol sharply criticized the tax-cutting patterns, begun in California in the late 1970s, that starved schools and districts most in need. His condemnation of the regressive tax policies in New Orleans framed a discussion of the crippled public school system, which became a flashpoint in media coverage of Hurricane Katrina just one year later.

Many Loyola students were already volunteering in New Orleans public schools as tutors; with Kozol's book as the common reader and his public lecture as catalyst, several faculty included service learning projects in their courses, projects that integrated student volunteer work at the schools with readings, class discussions, and written reflections.

Class Discussions

Unlike *Dead Man Walking*, Kozol's book did not polarize opinions in class discussions. Everyone could see how educational inequalities haunt a student throughout life, blocking the chances for human wholeness and success. The chal-

lenge was clear to all who had read and discussed the book: how to find ways to make good education available to all. In English classes, students tackled these questions by envisioning ideal schools and describing them in essays; they discussed their secondary school experiences and compared their educations to the schooling received by children in Kozol's book.

With their own educational backgrounds as a touchstone, students began thinking more critically about their goals at Loyola and longer-range plans. That byproduct of the *Savage Inequalities* discussion supported a central goal of the First-Year Experience initiative: creating more *intentional* learners, who seek out and structure their own learning, through thinking process anchored in analytical skills from text and dialogue.

From Class Discussions to Learning Communities

To integrate the common reading program into other developing first-

year experience projects, we placed students from one of the fall English classes into a learning community, spring 2005. The course extended the theme of educational opportunity throughout the academic year, focusing this semester on the meaning and values of a liberal education.

All twenty students from the fall course enrolled in a special section of English composition team taught by the English instructor from the fall course and a student affairs professional. Students focused on planning their courses for the next three years and wrote essays on their life path beyond graduation.

The students were intrigued by the presence of two instructors who often had different interpretations of the texts, as well different ideas about liberal education. Class discussions were more spirited than usual, as students warmed to the idea of how their own selection of courses, semester by semester, reflected choice making through critical thinking and clarification of their value systems, key goals of Jesuit education.

Living Learning Communities

In 2005-06, the College built on the learning community model by creating a number of *living* learning communities, grounded in that year's common text, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America*. Students would not only study together but would also live together to live in the residence halls, take linked common curriculum courses that incorporated the common reader, engage in service learning and social activities together, and participate in a first-year seminar taught by their course instructor, a Jesuit faculty member, and a student affairs professional. Each living learning community would consist of twenty first-year students who



Joseph M. O'Keefe, S.J., dean of the school of Education at Boston College, holds students in discussion.

would stay together throughout the academic year.

We welcomed the students to the living learning communities on August 26, 2005, as Hurricane Katrina churned through the Gulf of Mexico. By the 29th, Loyola was empty, with students and faculty spread across the U.S.--, and the first semester cancelled.

When we returned for the Spring 2006 semester, we adapted the living learning Communities to the new, post-Katrina environment, despite limited planning time. We knew that the shared living, studying, and social experiences would be especially valuable to students who had been scattered by the storm. Moreover, the aftermath of Katrina brought the issues of *Nickel and Dimed* into painfully sharp focus. As the book explores the lives of the working poor through the author's excursions into jobs with low pay, it introduces students to a strata of the American experience unknown to most of them. Before the storm, few could have imagined the actual lives of the working poor; after the media spectacle of flooding and suffering of people (mostly black and poor) in New Orleans, the life challenges Ehrenreich describes became increasingly real.

The Common Reading Program Since Katrina

Linked Courses

Several of the linked courses in Spring 2006 focused on the issues raised in Ehrenreich's book. In the English and philosophy courses, for example, discussions of *Nickel and Dimed* led students to examine poverty not merely as a condition for a given percentage of people, but as a function of socioeconomic forces that block people from achieving their potential. An exercise called "Star Power" helped reinforce these examinations. The exercise fixes the roll of the dice so that some people

will never succeed and others can hardly fail. As they moved through the exercise, students wrestled with the notion that many people are formed by their positions at birth, their place in society and the opportunities they are given or are blocked from ever getting; with the notion that the rich would continue to be rich by using the system to enhance their power; that the poor will stay poor – most of them, at least – because they never learn how to negotiate their way into a society that provides a ladder to better life.

First-Year Seminar

The common reading issues of poverty and injustice were central to the one-hour seminar as well. Focusing on the Jesuit tradition of education and the transition to college life, the seminar comprised classes and discussions led by Jesuit faculty, workshops with student affairs professionals, and service learning projects combining volunteer work and written reflection. Through these projects, students experienced Ignatian values in action, as they helped New Orleans' poor in the aftermath of the hurricane. Students helped gut and rebuild houses; they worked at neighborhood rallies to "Bring Back New Orleans"; they distributed food and supplies to homeless New Orleanians; they formed work crews to pick up debris from sidewalks and neutral grounds; one student even joined a band that played at worksites to keep volunteers' spirits up. By working in the devastated neighborhoods of New Orleans' working poor—so different from the high-and-dry, affluent neighborhood around the university—our students saw the consequences of social inequality in stark terms, an object lesson in the issues Barbara Ehrenreich discussed.

Looking toward the Future

While many students participated enthusiastically in the seminar and

the service learning, others complained about the workload and what they described as a "disconnect" among the course components: the classes on the Ignatian tradition, the transition-to-college workshops, the common reader and the academic material from the linked courses. Given our limited planning time after the storm, these weaknesses were understandable. As we look to the future of the living learning communities, however, we envision a closer collaboration among the team teachers guided by an anchor faculty member from one of the linked courses; extensive planning to agree upon pedagogies, reading materials, incorporation of the common reader, and themes from the academic courses.

The positive results from the living learning community pilot were so strong, however, that we are committed to continuing and expanding the program. Students bonded strongly with one another, not only within their own twenty-student groups, but also with students from the other groups as well. They reported talking frequently in the dorms together about issues from classes and the seminar, studying together and socializing. Consistent with the literature on first-year experience programs, almost all the students formed strong bonds to Loyola as well.

Ongoing Conversations

The common reading program was born of conversations—among Jesuit faculty, lay faculty, administrators, students, and staff. Conversations spurred the program's evolution into living learning communities; conversations are shaping its improvement and its changing role in the lives of first-year students. We hope the program itself will serve a catalyst for productive conversations at other Jesuit schools. ■